2. Municipal Solid Waste Characterization

How much municipal solid waste (MSW) is generated in the United States each year? What is the breakdown of the material by category (e.g., plastics, paper, glass) and how much of each material is recovered through recycling or composting?

According to the EPA publication Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 1992 Update in 1990 we generated 195.7 million tons of municipal solid waste, or 4.3 pounds per person per day. The municipal solid waste stream is broken down by category in the chart below. These 1990 statistics show that the largest component of the municipal solid waste stream is paper and paperboard (37.5 percent) and the second largest is yard trimmings (17.9 percent). Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 1992 Update (PB92-207 166) also summarizes how municipal solid waste is managed (e.g., landfill, combustion, recovery). In 1990, the total amount of material recovered from the municipal solid waste stream was 33.4 million tons, or 17.1 percent. Combustion facilities handled 31.9 million tons, or 16.3 percent of the municipal solid waste generated. The remaining 130.4 million tons, or 66.6 percent of the municipal solid waste generated, were sent to landfills. By the year 2000, EPA projects that the amount of municipal solid waste generated will reach 222 million tons, or 4.5 pounds per person per day. EPA continues to emphasize the importance of source reduction and recycling as the first and second priority components of the waste management hierarchy, and projects that the recovery rate for municipal solid waste will increase to between 20 and 30 percent in 1995 and between 25 and 35 percent in 2000.

U.S. Municipal Solid Waste Stream - 1990*

*Municipal solid waste estimates do not include construction and demolition waste, oil and gas waste, small quantity generator waste, and other wastes that may be disposed of in a Subtitle D landfill but are not municipal solid wastes.
**neg. = negligible